

RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONVERSION:
A RHODE ISLAND ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

As a result of adverse competition with the trucking, airline, and other shipping industries, United States railroads have suffered greatly. Thousands of miles of track have been abandoned since the Depression, and the U.S. rail system is now half the size it was during its peak in the 1920's. This is tragic, for railroads are one of the most efficient sources of transportation ever known.

However, one benefit of the shrinking rail system is that a new resource--abandoned rail corridors--is being made available. This resource is valuable for a number of uses, such as for buffer zones, building areas, and fitness and nature trails--in addition to preserving rail corridors for future rail use. This report centers on the use of abandoned railways for bicycle trails, with particular emphasis on the potential for such "rail-trails" in Rhode Island.

Conversion of rail grades to trails is supported in a number of legislative acts. Included are the 1976 Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act and a 1983 amendment to the Trails Act. This legislation clearly has some problems and is constitutionally questionable.

Despite this, a number of successful rail-trails have been created all over the country. These trails have had some management problems, but are, on the whole, extremely popular and useful.

In Rhode Island there are mixed opportunities for rail-trails. Fortunately, a few rail corridors which have much potential have been procured by state agencies and are currently being planned as rail-trails. However, there are a number of abandoned rail grades which might have had much potential, but are now in such discontinuous condition that rail-trails are impossible. The majority of abandoned railways in Rhode Island were abandoned long ago and have reverted back to, or been sold to, adjacent landowners and are now in multiple ownership. Extensive development since has rendered the corridors physically discontinuous. There are a few possibilities for short rail-trails, but there is little potential for longer trails beyond the two that are currently being planned. Unfortunately, the rails-to-trails movement has come too late to save most of the major rail corridors in Rhode Island.